

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE V-7

LOS ANGELES TIMES
21 MAY 1981

Author! Author!

Ross Thomas: 'I Like Having Written'

By WAYNE WARGA, *Times* Assistant Arts Editor

The doormat at his house high in the hills of Malibu says "Go Away," and after the inevitable pause to conquer an urge to turn tail and run, it turns out the man inside is a good bit like his literary leading men. Ross Thomas is droll.

He quickly volunteers that he gets most of his ideas from a post office box in New Jersey and then allows as how his most recent work—pre-strike—was performing a salvage job on the script of Francis Ford Coppola's unreleasable "Hammett."

"God knows what will happen with that," he says in a soft voice. "They have shot 80% of something, but not a movie. I saved about 30 to 35% and rewrote the rest. It was a case of 'Did anybody read the script? The typist maybe?' It was absolutely awful. I went back to Joe Gores' book as much as I could."



Ross Thomas

Most of the time, Thomas is pounding on his old Adler typewriter, turning out about 1,000 words a day on his latest novel. His first, "The Cold War Swap," was published in 1966 and his 18th, "The Mordida Man" (Simon & Schuster, \$13.95), was just published to the usual very good reviews.

"I really haven't done anything in the last 15 years except write and travel. I was your usual newspaperman who was determined to someday write a novel. I took four months' leave finally and did it. I sat down, wrote 'The Cold War Swap' and Morrow bought it. It was bought by Paramount for Steve McQueen but never made. I have no sad tales about the struggle to become a writer. I quickly saw it was a good way to make a living."

If all that sounds too good to be true, Thomas is quick to admit it hasn't gotten any easier.

"No. It gets harder and harder. Either that or you get more critical. I find myself rewriting more than I did at first. I sometimes find myself doing a paragraph nine times, 15 times. I don't think it makes much difference except to me, but I do it anyway."

"I like it when it's done. The process, of course, is painful. But when it works it is very satisfying. I don't like to sit down to write, but I like having written. There's a great deal of staring at the floor that goes on in this house."

Character as Plot Spring

Thomas' books contain one element seldom found in adventure novels, wit. And unlike many other writers,

he constructs his books around character far more than plot. His plots spring from the characters, a situation Thomas says makes writing a great deal more enjoyable.

"I prefer it that way. You are able to explore such things as greed, loyalty and even patriotism. If I have a hobby, it's politics—as an observer and not a participant anymore. It has certainly been an interesting year for observation. I do use the fact that I've been in the back rooms where the deals are being cut. If there is a trace of cynicism in my books, it's only based on reality."

Until he turned to writing, Thomas, 55, worked at an unusual variety of jobs. He graduated with an English major from the University of Oklahoma and went to work for the Daily Oklahoman.

"I was then in political public relations, the PR director for a couple of international labor unions and a radio foreign correspondent in Bonn. I was also an account executive for BBD&O out of London. They sent me to Africa and instructed me to put a little razzmatazz into the political campaigns for the first elections since independence in Nigeria. My last job was working for Jack Anderson in 1965 and I haven't had a job since then."

Putting razzmatazz into an election in Nigeria sounds suspiciously like the sort of thing the CIA might become involved in and the possibility brings a quick nod of agreement from Thomas. Did he in fact work for them?

Brushes With the CIA

"Not wittingly. Unwittingly, yes. They were involved in Africa. I was also involved in something called Public Service International, which it turned out was financed by the CIA. My most recent brush with them was a couple of years ago when for some reason they wanted WGBH in Boston to make a film, a drama, about the nightwatch at Langley. They sent the WGBH people out to see me. The Nation found out where some of the money to finance the show was coming from and wrote an article about it. I haven't heard from anybody since."

Although the foundation for his books is with the characters, they also have about them a strong sense of place, no doubt because Thomas visits each place he writes about. He and his wife Rosalie will go to Spain and Portugal later this year to work on the novel he says is still in gestation.

His writing day goes from approximately 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and he reads at the rate of seven to eight books a week. Sometimes he likes what he reads, often he does not.

"I just gave up on something called 'The Brain' by Robin Cook. That guy doesn't write. It's all occupational background—technical stuff. He is not a writer. When they start using exclamation marks I get suspicious right there."

Even when he is reading, he's thinking, working on his books.

"Writing is the most full-time occupation you can have," he says. "You're involved with it in one way or another most of your waking hours. If you get really involved you forget about yourself, which is very pleasant."